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NORTH KOREAN ENGAGEMENT: BALANCING RISK AND OPPORTUNITY

For more than half a century, the specter of a hostile, enigmatic and threatening North Korea has loomed large on the US. policymakers' horizon. A nation of only 22 million with a GDP of \$21.8 billion and a negative three percent growth rate, it is smaller than the state of Mississippi.¹ Yet North Korea consumes the world's attention far out of proportion to its size and truncated economic power. For the United States in particular, it is Thomas Jefferson's wolf, an issue no policy maker wants to take by the ears, yet once grasped, cannot be let go.² North Korea has forced itself onto the world stage with an attack on South Korea, a one million-man army, nuclear weapons research, and a long range missile development program. Powerful communist allies and a belligerent attitude ensured it received disproportionate attention. While this provided sufficient impetus for U.S. concern, a sudden change in the geopolitical landscape argues for more immediate results.

Despite a variety of strategic approaches to North Korea, U.S. policy there has been a marked failure. Its large and powerful army remains prepared to attack and it possesses a long range missile system with the capability to deliver nuclear payloads it now claims to have. Far from incorporating itself into the family of civilized nations, North Korea has thumbed its nose at international efforts to inspect its nuclear facilities or to provide basic human rights for its own citizens. Policies of containment, confrontation or isolation have not achieved success. The way forward may be defined as much by what not to do as by positive analysis. As a potential solution, this paper outlines a redefinition of our national interests as regards North Korea along

¹ Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook 2002. 2002 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002). 280-281.

² E.M. Halladay, Understanding Thomas Jefferson (Harper Collins, 2001). 157.

with a new strategy of engagement designed to better understand her, normalize bilateral relations and permanently secure peace and stability slowly opening North Korea to the west.

If past policies have not been effective, how can we speculate the future will bring a more positive result ? What has changed that now mandates a more concerted effort or hints at hope ? Factors both positive and negative are in play. The end of the Cold War produced a new global realignment. Russia can occasionally be counted on as a U.S. ally wishing to retain U.S. good will, technology and political cooperation. China, not a U.S. ally in any traditional sense, no longer exhibits open and consistent hostility toward the U.S. and has signaled that the old style, monolithic communism is over. China's chosen path requires the west, its technology and open markets. For North Korea, a diminution of the allegiance of its two primary allies is a change to which it must now adapt. But two other more powerful factors are now in play that previously did not enter into the policymakers' equation. Events of September 11th and North Korea's claim that it possesses both the technology to produce nuclear weapons and the weapons themselves are seminal issues that have drastically altered the former equation. U.S. intelligence notes previous Al-Qa'ida attempts to acquire WMD technology and material. The certainty they would attempt to use it on U.S. soil if obtained, and the knowledge that North Korea may make a suitable ally for such an endeavor adds emphasis to engaging North Korea now.

Clearly, our policy must address these new and disturbing factors. It is faulty logic to think that what has not worked before will now work with a nuclear armed North Korea. The way forward lies in new and uncharted strategic thinking. We must redefine our national interests in North Korea and pursue the policy that will result from that redefinition. It will require courage and consume time and resources, but the end product will be lasting, stable and cheaper than current unproductive efforts. In the strategic formula that risk derives from a

combination of vulnerability, capability and intent, U.S. policy has focused on capability. A new strategy should center on eliminating North Korean intent. This route is the path not of confrontation, containment, or isolation, but of engagement. Consistent and demonstrated efforts to assist North Korea to achieve its own strategic goals and the recognition that ours are not incompatible offers the best path to security for both nations.

The vital U.S. national interest in North Korea is the prevention of proliferation of WMD particularly to terrorist entities. To achieve this, our strategy will employ exclusively those means traditionally associated with soft power and be lead and sustained by engagement. While our immediate end must be to prevent North Korean proliferation of WMD and/or associated technology, use of engagement will permit long term normalization of bilateral relations. This will involve risk and may require us to accept North Korea as a member of the growing ranks of nations with a nuclear capability as a tradeoff for a strong and verifiable commitment to non-proliferation. It will also require acknowledgement of North Korean sovereignty coupled with a pledge of non-aggression. In return, we will eventually bring North Korea into the orbit of civilized nations, offer her ruling elite the opportunity to be judged by history as the cadre that brought North Korea out of the Dark Ages, and bring stability, security and prosperity to her people. In essence, we will refuse to permit North Korea to be our enemy. Also central to the strategy, but not overtly stated, will be consistent efforts to open North Korea to the west. From Kim Chong-il, throughout the ruling party apparatus and down to the population, U.S. intentions must be communicated and demonstrated. A true picture of the west and its political philosophy must be eventually allowed to seep into North Korean society.

We should also rely heavily on China to serve as guide and mentor in our efforts. Enlisting Chinese assistance as a full partner is essential. This will ease their concern, recognize

them as a power of import in the region, and permit them to assume responsibility and credit, as their own political system requires. Chinese assistance will permit us to avoid pitfalls by having an effective (and respected) translator. Chinese assistance can be secured with appropriate incentives. Technology, Most Favored Nation trading status and decreasing our emphasis on Chinese Human Rights practices will figure prominently in early negotiations with the Chinese. We must be prepared to accept these costs and recognize that Chinese gain in any of these areas will be temporary. Japanese, Russian and South Korean cooperation, assistance and aid will also figure prominently, but should be secondary to the Chinese role. Nevertheless, precoordination with key allies will be an essential step, along with the recognition that some of them, particularly South Korea, may not fully embrace our strategy.

Why should North Korea be open to any such overtures ? The answer must be that it is in her interests. It is here that we have failed most dramatically. Our understanding of North Korean aspirations, of their character as a nation and a people, and our ability to see inside their society, economy, military, or leadership are limited at best. The small picture we do see is of an intensely poor country, isolated, insecure, belligerent with its overseas representatives uncultured, lacking in diplomatic skill, and appearing unsophisticated and xenophobic to outsiders. As Robert K. Massie noted about Russians of the 17th century, “Those few Russians who traveled abroad emerged blinking like creatures of the dark led into the light. They disbelieved in or disapproved of most of what they saw. Foreigners were, of course, heretics, and contact with them was likely to contaminate . . .”³ On a comparative basis, North Koreans make the Russians appear almost cosmopolitan. This vast cultural divide contributes to political difficulties and North Korean arrogance born of insecurity.

³ Robert K. Massie, Peter the Great, His Life and World. 1991 ed. (New York; Knopf, 1980). 165

Analysis of recent North Korean behavior demonstrates the point. When declining requested U.N. special inspections of its nuclear facilities, North Korea went well beyond a simple refusal, obfuscation or delaying tactics normally be seen in such an international diplomatic dance. North Korea took the unprecedented step of admitting possession of nuclear weapons, and has since declared its intent to reprocess spent fuel rods to produce additional weapons. After such massive efforts to conceal, why the sudden and passionate declarations ? They make sense *only* as a maneuver designed to obtain our attention and require our engagement. While from our optic these efforts may appear crude, clumsy or inconsistent with our logic, they may conform perfectly to North Korean thinking and to a country with only a limited number of diplomatic cards to play. As a metaphor, it may be a child's temper tantrum, but it is nevertheless a child communicating a need for our attention and willingness, even eagerness, to engage. If we are able to look beyond preconceptions, and can outgrow past ideas of national interests, this overture presents a remarkable opportunity. As Robert Scalapino notes, "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK's) foreign policy is rational from the North's perspective: achieve diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan while relegating the Republic of Korea (ROK) to the sidelines."⁴

We do not understand this enigmatic country or its isolated leader. Until we can better grasp the nation with which we must interact, it behooves us to seek greater contact in all areas available to us. Initially we will need to ascertain exactly to whom our overtures should be directed. If North Korea is a monolithic, totalitarian monarchy, then we must focus our efforts

⁴ Robert A. Scalapino, "North Korea at a Crossroads" Essays in Public Policy; Number 73. Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace. (Stanford University. 1997.) Executive Summary.

on Kim Chong-il. If increasing contact (and Chinese assistance and guidance) show the path lies through more collective North Korean leadership, we will need to adjust quickly and accordingly.

An examination of the ways and means to implement the above strategy is now in order. What specific diplomatic, political, economic and military means can be brought to bear to assist in implementing a new national security strategy towards North Korea ? Means employed will include economic power, foreign aid, diplomacy, power of information, and intelligence. Power and influence will assist in efforts to secure cooperation among allies, but would prove counterproductive with North Korea. What are the ways associated with the above means ? Engagement is the centerpiece of the strategy. All tools employed must be used with consideration of their compatibility to it. While unstated, limited nation building may become a critical component and this would be a highly desirable situation.

Economic power will play a large role and can be used to quickly demonstrate good will. It can also be used to reward, maintain focus and provide tangible results palatable to the North Korean population at large and North Korean leadership in particular. Within this sphere are a myriad of tools. Agricultural assistance including advisors, provision of foodstuffs (such as PL 480 grain) modern agricultural tools and techniques, and providing markets and favorable trade consideration for North Korean agricultural products can be initiated early and expanded as needed. EXIM financing for U.S. products that further both U.S. and North Korean ends along with brokering traditional international financing mechanisms such as the World Bank and IMF should also be pursued. Efforts to open North Korean markets to U.S. products and the reverse will provide a mechanism to further increase contact among officials and citizens as well as provide economic benefit. Economic power and influence will also be key to enlisting Chinese

support as well as that of Japan, South Korea and other allies.

Foreign aid can provide a powerful stimulant, assisting the development of North Korea and further opening it to the world. We should seek to position ourselves as a proponent of foreign aid for North Korea. In addition to providing aid, we should work closely with allies to coordinate efforts, eliminate redundancy and ensure effectiveness of ongoing programs.

Diplomacy will be critical, as it must lead most of the initiatives the strategy demands. The diplomatic initiative should be led, initially, by an individual with stature and credibility in the eyes of North Korea. Former President Carter may be an ideal representative to initiate the critical first dialogue. Diplomatic contact should have as its goal sustained and frequent contact with North Korean officials. The diplomatic mission will be to convince North Koreans our national security interests are not in conflict with theirs and that a stable, open North Korea benefits all. Diplomacy will serve as the initial lever to open cracks of opportunity to be exploited as they appear. Diplomatic contact worldwide should be encouraged and every opportunity to engage North Korean officials on the diplomatic and military circuits pursued. A key difference with past policy will be increased diplomatic contact during times of heightened tension, not the reverse. American diplomats will have at the heart of their mission convincing North Korea that we will not accept it as an enemy.

Power of information plays a critical role in the long-term success of a strategy to open North Korea. With economic advancement, the ability of information to penetrate the country will increase. While not publicly stated, media not controlled by the state should be targeted for proliferation throughout the country. Particular emphasis on radio and Internet access by the population will advance our strategy and irreversibly weaken state control. U.S. public information libraries should offer unrestricted media services and these can be exported to local

communities by grants, aid projects, self-help programs and private donations. Putting a radio into the hands of every North Korean family would put a fatal dent in the current regime's stranglehold on information.

Intelligence must play a contributing role providing feedback on reactions of North Korean officials, China and our allies. This will permit us to adjust as necessary and avoid pitfalls and costly mistakes. Intelligence should have as its key mission discovering the plans and intentions of North Korean leadership, its willingness to engage, and its commitment to achieve mutual goals. It should be pressed to provide a clear picture of how North Korean leadership works, who is key in the decision making process and the interrelationships of its leadership. This will permit focusing efforts on individuals empowered to make commitments and will save time, money and effort by not directing resources toward those who do not control segments of North Korea of interest to us. It should be noted that the North Koreans themselves might not know how they intend to proceed and that leadership is fluid and changing, thus the intelligence community may be asked to steal secrets that do not exist. Nevertheless, engagement should provide unparalleled opportunities for access to North Korean officials. Bilateral intelligence overtures toward South Korean and Chinese intelligence services to assist with North Korea, while traditionally ineffective, should be renewed in light of a radical shift in policy.

Military power would prove counterproductive to our strategy, but use of other military tools can contribute to our goals. IMET type training and military exchanges would be groundbreaking measures that demonstrate sincerity and provide access to key North Koreans. Inclusion of North Korean military officers in select U.S. military schools, permitting increasing North Korean military observers on U.S. military exercises and port calls will further enhance

good will and serve as confidence building measures. Inclusion of a substantial number of key North Korean military and civilian defense officials on International Visitor programs to the U.S. should also be implemented.

No new policy discussion is complete without reference to the opportunities and constraints inherent in it. The opportunities are clear. Prevention of proliferation of WMD capability to terrorists and the establishment of greater stability in East Asia, increasing influence and cooperation with China, and a dramatic increase in the standard of living of North Koreans and greater respect for their human rights will flow from this policy. The opportunity to drive a nail in one of the final coffins of communist rule remaining in the world is a tempting goal. But it will not be realized without constraints. Such a radical shift in thinking and a redefinition of U.S. national security interests will not come without resistance, including domestically among rival political factions in America. It will provide much grist for the opposition political mill and will require courage, patience and effort to counter acquisitions of selling out, overreliance on appeasement, or failure to confront a clear threat. International allies, particularly South Korea will require strong convincing that this policy serves their interests as well. Reliance on China presents a challenge, but if our efforts are to succeed, Chinese assistance must be secured. East Asian stability and increasing markets for Chinese products is clearly in their interest and cannot be lost on their leadership. Having recently put a man in orbit, China is now only the third country to have achieved this scientific feat. There is no clearer evidence that this nation wishes to take a position as a world leader. The new North Korean strategy offers them the opportunity to place themselves center stage in an unprecedented peace initiative. The allure of international recognition and resulting prestige should prove a powerful stimulant to Chinese cooperation. During a time when resources are increasingly being tapped to fight terrorism, and Iraq

rebuilding and reconstruction threatens to absorb large funding, the cost will also be contested. Only strong presidential leadership, commitment to the stated ends and forceful and focused lobbying will secure the funding required. The greatest risk lies in North Korea's providing nuclear material to terrorists before the strategy can succeed. This can be defeated by communicating clearly, early and often to the North Koreans the basis for our shift in policy. It must be understood that the massive benefits that will accrue to them will be immediately reversed by any such proliferation. The North Koreans must determine their own future. The understanding that once used, the proliferation option is negated as their most effective tool should serve to contain this threat until the strategy's benefits begin to crystallize.

A redefinition of national interests in North Korea and a new strategy resulting from it will be a difficult and long-term undertaking. Orchestrating international support and enlisting China also present unique challenges. The initiative will require significant funding and will not yield the immediate result of a military strike. But neither does it risk a confrontation with two nuclear powers with massive land armies. If successful, it provides benefits unobtainable by force. Remarkably, the door has been opened by North Korea. It is our option to walk through it.

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